

The DeFluos

His blankets billowed like a sea of burlap swells clutching his thighs, his stomach, his arms—leaving tiny scratches behind that roused him to finally stand. It had been eight days since William's feet were placed upon the floor. As he stirred beneath the sheet an upsurge of particles thrust into the air and swam delicately into the beams of sunlight, pushing past the cracks in the aged and browned blinds. A rising crescendo of violins played in his ears as he rose for the first time in over a week of unobstructed and foggy silence. She had been gone for that long—her untouched piano sat concernedly in the center of the cold living room, waiting for her fingertips to wipe away its collected dust and pollen from the wild mustards that grew beneath the unclosed windows. A cup of her only once-sipped tea was perched absently atop it. Halfhearted, William stood before it and whispered to its ivory teeth, *I don't think she will come back today*. A single note escaped its body and hung in the air like a cautionary and caddish whine, a faint goodbye for Emma DeFluo.

An unshaven face awaited him in the dirty bathroom mirror—reflected alongside a limp and sleeping arm dangling from the edge of the porcelain bath, a lifeless index finger loosely hooking onto the arm of an empty teacup, *Emma?* The broken ruins of a fragile saucer lay scattered on the floor; she was *always so careless with her tea*.

Splashing lukewarm droplets across his cheeks, he let the basin overspill with the mineral waters from the underground well, the wrinkled likeness of fatigue peering up at him from the rippling surface. He had decided earlier, when he saw that her piano had clipped its own strings in a distraught state and would no longer play even for him, he would submerge himself into the cracked porcelain sink and sleep alongside her. He bent down and exhaled an “I miss you, Emma” into the liquid. As he submerged to his hairline, the surreptitious

overflow saturated the collar of his shirt, and his dripping left foot descended through a weakened beam beneath him—a chewed and fractured fissure causing a collapse of dripping young skin to crash to the floor. His fawn-like fall was followed with peculiar and unwelcome applause that reverberated from the intact boards below the claw-foot bath, heard only as muffled noise while his ear was pressed against the floor. As he lay there on the ground he saw them through the gap where his foot had been—the scrounging mice hurriedly weaving between the crawlspace beams to avoid William’s scathing gaze, hoisting away the broken pieces of Emma’s small plate.

A concussed William DeFluo stared in blinking confusion as the small animals ran, squinting after them through his disheveled dark hair as they receded into the cloud of debris and a haze of wood-scented smoke. A farfetched idea, he thought, that mice would burrow into his simplistic home. Emma had kept it clean—she had never mentioned vermin. Perhaps, he thought, they had moved in when she had moved out. Or moved on. Or moved away—wherever she had gone. The thin arm suspended over the bath’s edge was now gone, though, presumably submerged and trying to rest, so *I’ll find them myself*, he thought, *this must be why she left*.

In an impatient attempt to rid the home of intruders and bring his wife home, William began a rampant assault on the dark and swollen floorboards. Creating a shower of splinters, his nail beds began to bleed with every scrape at the sturdy wood. When each board had been pried up, the exception being the four planks supporting the antique tub, William found himself alone in a false silence.

Not to be outwitted, he left poisoned leaves on the crumbed countertops that night, and set traps along the opposing doorways to catch the mischievous pests. In the morning the traps lay empty. Among the rotting tomato bait—a misplaced tail, *a narrow escape!* For good measure, he thought, in his second attempt he’d leave trip wires here and there. When the fishing line had emptied its supply, he cried out for Emma, who *must be out of the bath by now*, listening for her soft rustling to echo from the garden. When she didn’t answer his queries as to where she kept the twine, he began his search for a new device.

“The piano,” he whispered. *I could use its unloved and idle strings.*

As he approached, a slight scratching, muffled in the thick wooden frame, seeped from the edges of the instrument. With every step closer, William grew uneasy at the thought of something rummaging inside of the prized possession. Angered, he advanced cautiously, and—after carefully moving the unconsumed cup to the matching wooden bench, a circle of warped grain left in its place—peeled back the lid.

“No, no, not this,” he hummed. *When Emma comes back, if she sees...* William glared at the noise. “Anything but the piano...”

It looked exhausted, the small brown mouse, sitting among the wooden musical hammers and unraveling a spool of linen thread to restring the missing chords of Emma’s gifted piano. “She can’t find you here,” he whispered through gritted teeth, although *she’d never find you here anyway*.

In an instant, William’s hands burst out, quickly reaching to clutch the mouse and declare him to be the first victim. He felt the warm fur and movable skin between his fingers while the whiskers brushed his palms softly, surprised at the animal’s lack of fight while caught in a human grasp. In a moment of empathy and warm-heartedness, William walked with his cupped hands outstretched towards the back door—as humble as Emma might have been. Instead of killing this one, *I’ll set you free... your reward for not biting*. When he managed to spin the doorknob with his knee and step out into Emma’s rustic and overgrown garden, he knelt down on a stone slab and gently opened his hands to place the creature on a mound of soft moss. There was no mouse, though, and William watched his fingers part and spread—his hands flipping in confusion.

“Is this a trick?” William yelled to the crickets.

He spun on his heels and hadn’t bothered to shut the door behind him, ignoring Emma’s faint voice calling to *please keep the breeze out*. Swindled by a clever rodent, with his intelligence challenged, William’s frustration began to glaze his eyes. In swift motions he threw open kitchen drawers, grasping at potential tools—old silver spoons, a rusted screwdriver, butter knives and bent nails. He spilled them all onto the floor, scattering the utensils as he dropped to his knees among them. Without hesitation he began prying and digging. Like the floor of the bathroom, after a set of hours had passed, the same fate met

the kitchen.

The pale and girlish feet of a young wife approached the threshold of a dusty breakfast nook, halfway into his chore, asking, “William, what have you done?”

“The mice,” he answered, breathlessly continuing on without looking up.

“Mice did this?”

“No, Emma,” he said, wiping the hair from his eyes but not looking up, then scolding, “your teacup left a ring on the piano’s varnish, you know.”

“I’m sorry.”

William listened as her footsteps faded out like the soft end to an acoustic song, and he continued to dig, wondering *where has she been all this time?*

Within moments he found himself kneeling in the damp and cold soil beneath the home, ripping away floorboards and tossing them to the side. For three days he did this—spending his time frantically destroying the first floor’s foundation—searching desperately for the infestation of the quick-witted rodents and intently working around an untouched spot under the sink that was still full of Emma’s stained teacups. He’d leave this spot for her to stand and wash her antique china. *She wouldn’t like to get her feet dirty*, he thought.

On the third day, he found them. Huddled into a dark corner under the first step of the narrow staircase, the mice sat around the tiny flame of a flickering matchstick. A paschal feast lay before them, in small plates constructed of sorrel leaves. Refined herbs, overabundant with warmth—the mice had harvested this meal from the fields of abandoned cutting boards. Sugarless breads, hallowed kernels of bright corns, salted insect wings dipped in unpasteurized milks from the neighbor’s goats. The broken bits of Emma’s dropped saucer had been haphazardly repaired, forming a cracked platter on which communal hoards of pumpkin seeds were stacked. William recognized these foods, and imagined how the mice came to possess them. Henpecked and bellicose, they must have trudged through the unfenced weeds for this revelry—these nimble pests, northwesterly scavenging.

“I know that corn,” William said, reaching down into the crawlspace and plucking a kernel from their woven-wheat table. “I know where you got this—the neighbor’s land, and—” William reached in again and took a tiny thimble from the smallest mouse’s hands,

staring curiously at its crimson contents. The beige runt's dreary and drunken eyes gave way to *wine, of course*.

A few drops of the sugarless liquid, containing only the sweetness of old pennies, satiated the beveled parts of the silver sewing tool. He stared down at it while the mouse reached up with an enthusiastic liver and an undignified greediness decorating his face, his eyes saying, *pardon you sir, but this drink is my own, I cultivated, harvested, cleaned it myself*.

"Cleaned?" *Of the foliage?* William thought. *These outdoor creatures reaped this? Outside? Such a proper inconvenience!* With that, the diminutive mouse snatched back his makeshift cup with a hiss, and stared up at the meddlesome man with a bent brow.

An awkward pair of moments passed while the mice continued their dinner and William hovered above them, watching as they chewed on the legs of roasted beetles and foraged mint leaves from Emma's herb garden.

"Show me," he pleaded, as the mice stopped chewing to peer up at the man while an unfavorable sigh collectively escaped them. *Please show me where you got this wine*.

They passed slight looks to one another and began to rise. One by one they clawed their way up the small wooden brim and out of the staircase to cross the exposed soils of the living room. Seemingly oblivious to the mayhem their landlord had caused, they led him through the kitchen—quiet as to not wake his likely sleeping wife, who hadn't appeared again in quite some time—and past the back door, into the garden and through a field of wheat.

They walked in line, timid squeaks emitting from their procession, as William assumed them to be discussing the assorted disasters of the old and unloved pasture—the abandoned tractor parts and rusted plows that littered the landscape. They commented on the northern aardvark that burrowed in the oldest oak tree, the consulting worms that hid underground too much lately, the inquiring owl who was most likely watching as they passed through knee-high weeds and wild rye. Their small noises lent themselves as the only guidance William had as he struggled to see them march near his feet, their size concealing them beneath the undergrowth of freshly fallen birch leaves and abandoned kestrel nests.

His growing preoccupation with the hiking mice distracted him from their direction,

and he soon found himself surrounded by familiarity. The sweet smell of peppermint plants greeted his nose, and he soon began tripping over cast-aside bricks and scrap metals that seemed very much like the leftover pieces of whatnot from his old work shed. In a few more strides they sauntered into a clearing, and William could see that they were walking in a circle as they quickly approached the front of his cabin. The shrubs had begun to overgrow against the bricks and bare logs that supported the home; untidy leaves pooled randomly about the yard. He watched as the curtains fluttered outside into the air with the suction of the gust, and a high shriek interrupted his thoughts before he could remember why he had never closed the window. The mice continued on in indifference, leaving one to rest behind them as a piece of glass pierced his small thigh. The little pest writhed and kicked in pain, attempting to remove it without the help of his cohorts.

William was compliant in following and, when the striding mice led him to the front of his own home and preceded to vanish into his unattended hedges, he stood for a moment to question the smells that were masked beneath the unkempt herbs. When the mice called to him from beneath the bushes he sank to his knees and began to crawl toward their muted whimpers.

As he inched closer to the foundation of the house, under the shrubs, the smell grew stronger—a pungent mix of gutter-sifted rain and saturated soils. With his last reach to meet the gathered and waiting mice, his hand landed on another, though slender and stiff. The sight of this pale arm, matching the one that he had found in the bath, was enough to distract from the shards of glass ripping through the clothes around his knees and forearms.

The eyes of the mice asked questions as they peered at him through their peripherals. William noticed, and quickly began to feign guilt while he comprised his thoughts of salvaged justification. Emma's lifeless body lay gracefully against the cement foundation, her useless ear pressed to the ground, listening in vain for the hum of buried cicadas. William hushed her gently—*this isn't what it seems*, even as she didn't speak—and stroked her hair to brush away the crushed bits of leaves and hungry mosquitoes; *you didn't love the piano*. The breeze carried the seeds of wild hawksbeard past his nose, provoking a gentle crumple of his brow, and up through the window to heap atop the instrument. *You loved the herbs, the tea, and*

the antiques. Not the piano.

William felt the stare of inquisitive pests directed at his sweaty temples, and he closed his green and troubled eyes to think of a reply. *Is it so bad*, he thought, *to recycle an unloved gift?* The mice held their insistent gaze until he spoke, displaying frustrated teeth in an impatient attempt to urge him on. “She loved jewelry,” he said to them. *So I made her a necklace instead.*

His eyes closed again, willing the memory resting behind his lids to project itself onto the brick wall and ease his miniature jury—but it played only for him. Emma’s delicate hands resting a steaming cup on expensive, polished wood. Teacups accompanying her to each room, harboring nursed herbs from her adored garden, carelessly placed here and there, *she prefers tea to me!* Teacups in the bathtub spilled and shattered as William tangled his arms around her bare and dripping body. There he was, pulling her from the water that began to seep into the old beams, weakening the already aged floor. The satisfying sting of releasing the birthday gift’s unused strings, the thrifty recycling of spring-steel into an indispensable necklace, *she always loved her lockets*—and the surprised scream of a startled recipient. William’s lashes bound open as the recollection of a shattered window crept into his blurred nostalgia. *Staggering in astonishment is all*, he insisted, *she lost her balance and fell through.*

William and his mice found her there, in her landing spot, with a necklace made of rusted piano strings and red wine juices seeping through her teeth—creating a stream over the unstrained and dried peppermint leaves sticking to the corners of her mouth—*they held their cups here.* The smallest mouse, restlessly overcome with thirst, began biting a piece of braided twine that strapped his silver cup to his back. William stared in amazement as the mouse stepped forward to demonstrate, holding a thimble to Emma’s blue lips to catch the droplets of blood that had left cold trails down the side of her right cheek, wringing her hair to salvage the missed droplets.

Pulling back his thimble, the tiny creature pitifully looked up at William, his eyes darting back to say *our well is beginning to dry up.* William stared wide-eyed and slack jawed, unable to tear his gaze from the glazed irises that comprised his wife’s vacant stare. He withdrew his hold from her cold flesh, intently examining the narrowly serrated lines trailing across the skin of his palm—a puzzle-piece match to the indents around Emma’s small neck,

responsible for the *blood all over the strings, no appreciation!*

Petite pieces of broken glass stole his attention as they glistened, imbedded into his fingertips. William's eyes began to watch as the wound from the window shards seeped the same red wine from his hand to match her lips. Unwilling to let it go to waste, he held out a fingertip to let his blood fill the mouse's tiny thimble, topping off what Emma could no longer provide. As he tensed his veins to force a faster flow, he watched the drop fall and soak into the lonely earth—no one there to collect his gift.